

ELECTRIFICATION IN INDIAN HOUSEHOLDS BENEFITS MEN MORE THAN WOMEN: STUDY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

And then there was light: A tribal woman looks on as an electric bulb shimmers in her little hut at the Edaliparakudi settlement of Edamalakudi, the only tribal village panchayat in Kerala. File photo. | Photo Credit: [Thulasi Kakkat](#)

As new areas gain access to basic levels of electricity, men in these households tend to dominate its use, according to a study conducted in India which suggests that men benefit more than women from such access.

The study, published in the journal *Nature Sustainability*, highlights intra-household power dynamics as an important factor to consider for enabling more equitable energy access in developing countries.

Until now, scientists believed that with better electricity access in the developing world, less time and effort was needed for tasks related to cooking, water collection, and other housework, which are typically undertaken by women.

However, the researchers behind the current study, including those from Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in the U.S., said it not enough to just look at access, since this does not adequately consider the local social context and household power dynamics.

As part of the study, the researchers employed a two-part approach to understand how electrified households in India use energy.

First, they conducted detailed interviews with over 30 women in electrified households which revealed what appliances were used in each house, and who typically used them.

The scientists then categorized common appliances according to typical use patterns as one of three types — more male-used, more female-used, or neutral.

According to the study, households tended to have more male-used appliances than neutral, and more neutral than female-used appliances.

The scientists attributed this difference to the nature of some appliances that are more female-used, such as sewing machines, mixers, and grinders. However, they said, this gender gap of electricity use existed even for the least expensive appliances like fans and light bulbs.

While the poorest households in the survey had multiple bulbs and fans, the researchers said, these were rarely found in kitchen spaces.

The researchers said this was despite interviewees saying that electrification in these places would make their household duties easier, and free up time for other activities.

Only about a quarter of the women felt that electricity had granted them added time to pursue activities which they wanted to do outside of housework, the researchers said.

Many of the women explicitly stated that the appliances purchased in their house were used predominantly by their children and husband.

The researchers said in these households in Gujarat, where resources were scarce, male use of electricity was prioritised.

“Other researchers have shown that electricity access can provide important benefits for poorer households and improve female well-being. However, we suggest that dynamics within the households can affect the way household members use electricity and thereby maintain or exacerbate unequal gender relationships,” said study co-author Paulina Jaramillo from CMU.

The same patterns of gender inequality also existed within households in other states, including Bihar, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh, according to the study.

Households had more male-used appliances, the study said, compared to more female-used appliances, even when controlling for household income. However, it noted that in female-led households, these patterns of electricity use did not hold. Some female-led households, the researchers said, were more likely to have light bulbs and fans in the kitchen, unlike male-led households.

According to the researchers, women choose to use electricity differently than is typical in male-led households, reflecting how male-female power differences influence electricity use patterns. The scientists added that this gender electricity use gap persists for years.

Households continued to have more male-used appliances than female-used appliances a decade after first receiving electricity, even for relatively wealthier households, the researchers said.

“Access to electricity is a necessary precondition to achieving many development goals. But it is not a sufficient one to help developing countries overcome social norms that can drive who benefits from development,” Jaramillo said.

The researchers concluded that social contexts ultimately shape how sustainable development interventions unfold.

“When people study sustainable development goals, they tend to look at them in isolation. Our study advocates for more analysis as to their interactions and develops a framework for which to do that,” said Daniel Armanios, study co-author from CMU.

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